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JACK ANDERSON

Falklands Crisis Reveals Strange Deadfellows

The Falklands crisis has produced some strange criss-crossing of diplomatic wires. Consider this Machiavellian mix-up:

• Argentina supports the clandestine U.S. effort to undermine the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

• But the United States is backing Britain in the Falklands dispute.

• Yet Nicaragua has come out on the side of Argentina against Britain.

• Still, the right-wing Argentine junta is dedicated to the proposition that the Sandinista government is a nest of communists that must be destroyed, by military means if necessary.

The incredible fact is that the Argentine government, for all its new public embrace by Nicaragua, has done nothing to halt or even cut back its anti-Sandinista military plotting.

For the past 18 months a small but important group of Argentine soldiers has been conspiring and collaborating with anti-Sandinista exiles in the southern province of Honduras. The latest count of Argentine military officers in the Honduras hinterland is 50. That's more, not less, than the number who were operating there before the Falklands eruption.

Nor did the Argentine military advisers slip off to Honduras behind the backs of the ruling junta. The clandestine operation in Central America has the blessing of the junta. Sources told my associates Bob Sherman and Dale Van Atta that the Argentine advisers appear to have settled in for the long haul.

The roots of the Argentine enmity for the Sandinistas run deep. They feed on the bad blood between the military leaders and the leftist guerrillas. Their vendetta has turned Argentina into a land of assassinations and kidnapings and fear in the night.

One of the principal reasons for the junta's coup in 1976 was the determination to seek out and destroy the underground Montonero movement and People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). The excesses of this "dirty war" have been well-chronicled: thousands of innocent civilians tortured and killed in the frenzied search for communists and sympathizers.

The bloody campaign largely succeeded. The Montoneros and their ERP allies were either killed or driven into exile. Some took refuge in Nicaragua.

One Montonero leader, who was implicated in an assassination plot, subsequently became a Nicaraguan government official at Managua's Sandino Airport. (The assassination attempt, incidentally, missed the high Argentine official who had been marked for death and killed his innocent daughter instead.)

The Argentine military consider the leftist exiles still dangerous. They point to the clandestine radio station the Montoneros set up in Costa Rica in 1979, for example. It beamed anti-junta messages throughout Central America and could be heard in Buenos Aires.

"Finally," one source explained, "the Argentines believe the Montoneros and the ERP will be coming back to Argentina some day, this time with logistical support from the Cubans and the Sandinistas."

Footnote: An Argentine Embassy spokesman flatly denied to my reporter Jon Lee Anderson that Argentine mercenaries are operating in Central America.

Headlines and Footnotes: Ambassador Max Kampelman, U.S. delegate to the suspended Madrid talks on the 1975 Helsinki human rights accord, predicts a new headache when the talks resume: Rev. Billy Graham's naive statements about religious freedom in the Soviet Union. Graham's gaffe could be "a gift to the Soviet system and a major blow to the cause of human rights and religious liberty," Kampelman wrote in a memo to his staff, adding: "We will have our hands full in Madrid as the Soviets quote his statements back to us."

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